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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a collection of activity ideas to help children gain perspective on the present use of television. The activities address both advantages and drawbacks of a television society. Students develop a critical view of the impact of television on the culture by participating in the activities. The activities include: (1) "TV Timeline"; (2) "Commercial Production"; (3) "Favorite Commercials"; (4) "Compare TV, Radio, and Newspaper Event Coverage"; (5) "Topical TV Collage"; (6) "Storybook Television"; (7) "Sensational TV"; (8) "TV Careers"; (9) "Classroom TV Studio"; and (10) "Children's Programming." (EH)

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Facilitating Children's Understanding of Television as an Agent for Cultural Change

by

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Rationale

The United States is a television society. We watch the news as we eat breakfast and dinner. When a crisis occurs, television is often our first source of news and information. A quiet night at home is likely to be spent watching a favorite show or one of the many made for TV movies.

Many homes have several television sets. A large screen theater style set with stereo speakers may be a central focus of the family room or informal living room. A TV set with an integrated VCR bottom may well lurk in our kitchens or bedrooms. Not uncommonly the VCR is programmed to tape television shows when we're not able to see them at their original broadcast time. The ubiquitous TV remote lies only inches from our seat and its disappearance can cause major family disruptions.

Television programming today is amazingly diversified. Cable and satellite television feeds offer from 50 to over a hundred channels. Images from around the world are broadcast and reliably captured with amazing clarity. Programming includes features for virtually all potential audiences and interests.

But, of course, we weren't always like this. Life wasn't always so centered on the use of television. The hours we now spend on TV were devoted to such things as extended conversations, reading for pleasure, parlor games, and handicrafts. Images of other places and other people's lives were only experienced first-hand or captured on photographs. Visual and verbal communications about happenings in society were more slowly transmitted and carefully filtered.

The collection of activity ideas that follow attempts to help children gain some perspective on our present use of television. The activities addresse both the advantages and drawbacks of us having become a television society. As a result of being engaged in these activities students will develop a critical view of the impact of television on our culture.

Instructional Goals

As a result of this unit children will:

- identify significant developments in the history of television
- learn about the benefits of television as a medium of communication
- become aware of the undesirable effect of television on individuals and society

Activity #1 TV Timeline

Scramble the events in attached timeline of important developments in the evolution of television. Ask students to reassemble the timeline events along a horizontal time continuum drawn on the chalkboard. Once the timeline of events is constructed, go over each event and describe why it is included on the timeline. Research important events and people further. To make this activity more difficult, detach the dates from the events and see which items the students can still place

correctly on the time continuum.

Activity #2 Commercial Production

Have individual or small groups of children produce a video-format TV commercial for their school, classroom, best friend, favorite book or movie. The commercial should make use of common advertising techniques such as celebrity endorsements, band wagon appeal, humor, slogans, etc. The videos should be limited to between 60 and 90 seconds, follow a planned script, include background music, and special effects. Hold a film festival competition to determine which commercials are best. Give awards for such categories as best special effects, best music, etc.

Activity #3 Favorite Commercials

Ask the class to identify their favorite TV commercials. Briefly discuss why these commercials are their favorites. Ask several student to videotape their most favorite commercials and being them into class for a viewing. Show and reshow the commercials, each time inviting the students' analysis of what makes the commercial effective. Note the sales devices and appeals used. Conclude this activity by asking the students to either (a) rewrite the commercial without those features, (b) create a new commercial for the same product, or (c) suggest, in writing three modifications that would improve the commercial.

Activity #4 Compare TV, Radio, and Newspaper Event Coverage

Compare TV and print versions of several events. Determine which communication medium offers the fullest and most accurate coverage. Identify the benefits of each medium on a data collection chart. Invite reporters, both TV and newspaper) in to explain and/or defend their piece on the event.

Activity #5 Topical TV Collage

Bring in popular magazines that feature television personalities. Working in groups of two or three, create miniature collages centered on common TV show genres (e.g., game shows, soaps, crime shows, cartoons, talk shows, and how-to shows). On the back of each collage, ask the students to list the present top-rated shows of that particular genre. Supplement this list with several paragraphs that describe the times of day that these shows tend to be aired, the types of products that are sold at commercial breaks, and a brief history of earlier shows of the same genre.

Activity #6 Storybook Television

Read Fix-It by David McPhail. (This story describes what happens when a young child's television viewing habits are disrupted by a broken TV.) Ask the students if they have ever been frustrated by a nonworking or poorly working television. Have them share some of their own fix-it experiences. Review all of the fun things that Emma's parents did to try to keep her entertained while the TV was being repaired. (Ask the children if they've ever done these things and if they enjoyed doing them.) Discuss the significance of the ending of the story, when Emma, the main character, was so busy reading a book to her doll and cat, that she didn't come to watch the TV when her father finally got it fixed.

Activity #7 Sensational TV

Read *Sensational TV. Trash or Journalism* by Nancy Day. Discuss as you read, some of the major questions and issues that are raised in the book. For example: the blurring of the dividing line between news and entertainment; the difference between journalism and sensationalism; the question of what is news; the value of tabloid TV; the ethics of checkbook journalism; the effects of television violence; and the book's guidelines for being a critical viewer.

Activity #8 TV Careers

Investigate careers in television using a book such as *Television Production Today!* by James Kirkham. Contact local stations and schedule a field trip of its production facilities. Invite local TV personalities into the classroom for interviews on issues such as the quality of local news coverage or a station's coverage of a specific event.

Activity #9 Classroom TV Studio

Set up your own TV studio in the classroom using common video equipment. Create a television news and talk show that features your own students and the events of the week in review. Use the project to hone writing, interviewing, speaking, and problem solving skills. Assess the effectiveness of this learning experience, comparing it to the activities and events that had to be given up so that it could be created. Note the amount of work and time input for the amount of actual viewing time that resulted.

Activity #10 Children's Programming

Make a list of all locally available children's programs (note: it is good to debate with the class the question of what qualifies as a children's program) and the times at which they typically air. Analyze the list for themes in order to discover what the offerings reveal about what adults thing is appropriate for children to view. Select several of the best children's programs and analyze several episodes. Get the students to describe and write about what they find. Questions to address are: Is there a predictable plot? What topics or themes are covered? Is this content truly interesting and appropriate? Who might object to this program and why? Supplement this study with a similar investigation of the commercials that air with these programs.

TV FACTS[1]

- The average American watches more than 6 hours of television a day.
- Television is the first choice for news, information, and entertainment.
- Vladimir Zworykin, after playing a key role in TV's invention, said in a 1982 interview that the thing he liked most about television was the "off switch."
- Two Harvard college students invented the first video game in 1961; it required a $50,000 mainframe computer to make it play.
- The introduction of TV into a remote Canadian town spurred a 160% increase in violent acts among 1st and 2nd grade children in a two-year study.
- An average viewer of U.S. television is likely to hear more than 14,000 sexual references each year.
- The white murder rate went up 130% after television was introduced in South Africa in 1975.
- The images on a TV screen are actually still pictures, shown quickly (thirty complete images each second) that the eye is tricked into seeing smooth motion.
- The best predictor of violence in children is not how their parents raised them, but how much TV they watch.
- Researchers estimate that the average child will see 100,000 acts of violence by the end of elementary school.

[1] taken from Day, N. (1996). Sensational TV. Trash or Journalism. and Riehecky, J. (1996) Inventors & inventions. Television.

TV TIMELINE[2]

- 1806 Jons Jakob Berzelius discovers selenium is photoelectric
- 1835 Samule Morse sends an audible code of electrical signal over wires.
- 1876 Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone.
- 1878 Crookes invents the cathode-ray tube (CRT).
- 1895 Marconi sends a Morse code radio signal two miles through the air.
- 1899 Marconi sends a signal across the English Channel.
- 1901 Marconi sends a signal across the Atlantic Ocean.
- 1906 Fessenden & de Forest send voices over wireless for the first time.
- 1908 Lee de Forest broadcasts the Metropolitan Opera to receivers in NY city.
- 1924 Baird broadcasts the first mechanically produced television picture.
- 1924 Alexander Zworykin develops the first fully electronic television camera
- 1927 Herbert Hoover's speech telecast from Wasington, DC to New York.
- 1936 First TV cable laid between Philadelphia and New York city.
- 1939 RCA displays 12 television sets at the New York World's Fair.
- 1941 The Federal Communications System (FCC) licenses the first TV station.
- 1947 Six hundred TV stations are licensed across the United States.
- 1947 President Harry Truman's address to Congress telecast.
- 1947 First baseball World Series is telecast.
- 1947 Frank G. Back invents the "zoom" lens.
- 1948 The transistor invented by John Bardeen, W.H. Brattain, & W.B. Shockley
- 1948 Texaco "Star Theater" with Mildon Berle went on the air.
- 1948 First national political conventions telecast between NYC & Washington.
- 1951 Ten million TV sets were operating in U.S. homes.
- 1953 Color television sets were first offered to the public.
- 1956 Ampex Corporation introduces the videotape recorder.
- 1962 First satellite TV pictures transmitted across the Atlantic Ocean.
- 1965 Videotape recorders become available for home use.
- 1972 First video game system, Odyssey 100, introduced.
- 1972 Beta format and 1/2 VCR videotapes are available for rent.
- 1977 Digital audio is introduced.
- 1978 Laser videodisk players introduced.
- 1980 Networks begin telecasting closed captioned shows.
- 1981 Japanese demonstrate HDTV.
- 1989 First 100% three-D TV is broadcast.
- 1990 Congress passes the Children's Television Act

[2] taken from Riehecky, J. (1996) Inventors & inventions. Television.

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